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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to assess the connotative dimension, or imposition of second meaning on the message proper, of newspaper photographs. Forty-three front pages from the "Washington Post" were analyzed, concentrating on the largest or most conspicuously placed photograph on each page. A list of descriptive features was created to cover relevant data for composing a news photo identification card. Four judges rated a subsample of 14 photos according to perceived degree of denotation (informative power) and perceived degree of connotation (affective power) on a five point scale. By comparing the affective power mean scores of the 14 pictures with four descriptive features considered indicators of connotation (size, use of verbal aids, emphasis on nonverbal messages, semantic overtones), it was found that those photographs high in affective power also emphasized nonverbal messages such as conspicuous facial expressions, gestures, or posture conveying a symbolic meaning. The pictures that had the lowest affective power scores did not display such an emphasis. The use of the identification card to describe the 43 photographs in the sample revealed a potential for comparison among pictures, themes, and news photos' conponents. (HTH)

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THE CONNOTATIVE DIMENSION OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

by

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It is a truism in the journalistic milieu that news photographs bear evidence of facts and share the objectivity required from news texts.

Photojournalism has thus built its reputation upon the denotative aspect of photographs and their documentary value. The fact that news pictures can be outlets for symbolic meaning is either overlooked or, at most, uneasily acknowledged by news media professionals.

This paper is an attempt to explore the connotative dimension of newspapers' photographs by looking into possible indicators of implicit meaning which are here believed to coexist with the pictures' explicit informational content.

A framework for the analysis of news photos will be presented and tentatively applied to 43 randomly selected newspaper front page photographs.

The basic question in this paper is not whether newspapers' photographs connote but how can their connotative dimension be assessed.

Theoretical Framework

The connotative dimension of news photographs is regarded as a function of human intervention upon the visual message. Barthes (1977:20) acknowledged such intervention in defining connotation as "the imposition of second meaning on the message proper".

Interventions can occur at both the sender level and the receiver level. In the same way that the technical treatment given to a photograph is an intervention, so is the decoding of the visual stimulus by the receiver's eyes. In Barthes' framework, certain phenomena at work on the message's production and reception levels, are indicators of connotation:

> ... on the one hand, the press photograph is an object that has been worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms, which are so many

> factors of connotation; while on the other hand, this same photograph is not only perceived, received, it is read, connected more or less consciously by the public that consumes it, to a traditional stock of signs. (Barthes, 1977:19).

Whether as senders or receivers, we all process visual messages on three overlapping levels: (1) the representational, which, in photojournalism, is evidenced by the documentation of reality; (2) the abstract, in which the visual fact is modified to encompass an expressive dimension; and (3) the symbolic, where the connotative force of the photojournalistic message resides. (Dondis, 1973:67).

Like Dondis, Barthes (1977c) distinguished three levels of meaning in visual messages: (1) informational, (2) symbolic and (3) level of significance (referring to the field of the signifier, not to signification). In his theoretical approach, the symbolic meaning comprises: (a) the obvious symbolic meaning, or intentional connotation, and (b) the obtuse symbolic meaning, or visual pun, open to all sorts of interpretation. "Obvious" means "which comes ahead", the meaning that presents itself naturally to the mind; "obtuse" refers to "that which is blunted, rounded in form", the meaning that "opens out in the infinity of language" (Barthes, 1977c:54-55). Figure 1 shows a picture set illustrating the news story "Duke Approves Nixon Library

Figure 1

Size: 21 column/inches. Verbal Aids: No.

Emphasis on non-verbal messages: Yes.

Lines' semantic overtones: No.

Affective Power: 4.7 (on 5-point scale).

Talks". This is one example of obvious symbolic meaning. In Figure 2 (picture illustrating story on Angolan town's devastation), an obvious symbolic meaning is perceived in the abadoned shoes and the empty milk can, as debris and misery. But there is also an obtuse meaning in the milk brand "Nido", product of a controversial multinational corporation (Nestle).

Like Barthes, Sekula (1975) attributed a rhetorical function to photographs, both in art and in the press. He contends that, at any given moment of reading, in any given context, photographs tend towards one of two poles of meaning: photographs as expression vs. photographs as reportage, or affective value vs. informative value.

These poles can be used to classify photographs into journalistic vs. artistic even though art photographs often have an informative value and some news photos can be considered artistic, by their expressive value. In this paper, photojournalistic messages are ranked by degrees of informative and affective power.

Empirical Antecedents

Swanson (1955) studied readership habits in a survey of 130 daily newspapers in order to assess the relationship between importance attributed to subjects reported with and

without the aid of photographs. Photographs were found to increase the readership of the news items connected to them.

Kennick (1959) investigated the changes in meaning resulting from the combination of pictures and caption. His data indicate that pictures with caption are interpreted differently from pictures alone or captions alone.

Culbertson (1974b) studied the emotional impact of newspapers pictures as opposed to detailed matter-of-fact verbal descriptions. Of 462 comparisons, 96 received identical ratings on emotional impact of pictures and verbal description combined; verbal descriptions alone were rated higher in 203 comparisons while pictures alone were found to have a higher emotional impact in 163 comparisons.

Miller (1975) used the content of news photos from two metropolitan newspapers to analyze the treatment given to women's roles and men's roles in the news. She concluded that the selection of news photographs by the newspapers studied did not correspond to the reality of occupational distribution by sex in the newspapers' circulation area.

Conclusions to be drawn from the literature reviewed are twofold: first, the connotative dimension of news photographs has been a concern of leading visual communication theorists (Barthes, 1977; Dondis, 1973;

Sekula, 1975). Second, the empirical investigations of news photos' meaning are mostly audience oriented, with focus on variables such as readership, emotional impact and audience reaction to news items. Little or no research is available on (a) the connotative aspect of photojournalistic messages qua messages and (b) the use of news photos as an indicator of editorial orientation. The present paper will hopefully foster such research.

Research Design and Methodology

In order to develop the framework for news photos analysis presented here, I examined 43 front pages of The Washington Post comprising six weeks between Wednesday, August 26 and Wednesday, October 7, 1981. The starting date was randomly selected. The study concentrated on "the main picture", here defined as the largest and/or the most conspicuously placed on the front page (top or center of page location).

A list of descriptive features was created in order to cover relevant data for composing a news photo ID card (shown in Appendix I). The photographs were measured in column/inches, caption included, since captions - or cutlines - are considered an integral part of the visual message in photojournalism. (Hicks, 1952; Arnold, 1956).

The photographs' connotative dimension was traced by two sets of procedures: (1) identification of each picture according to ten descriptive categories (See Appendix I) and (2) evaluation of the photographs according to their perceived denotative and connotative value.(See Appendix II).

Photo Identification

The following categories from the pictures' ID cards were examined as indicators of connotation:

1. Size - pictures measuring 20 column/inches and more, that is, above the mean size of the 43 photograohs examined, were considered to connote the attributed importance of the news.

2. Verbal Aids - (a) the use of overlines (headlines belonging to the photo), catchlines (title given to the caption) and/or justaposed catchlines (title printed on the photograph); (b) the semantic overtones found in any of the lines (captions and verbal aids here specified). Semantically loaded words, metaphors and puns were taken into consideration. As mentioned before, captions were considered an integral part of the news picture. Therefore, they were not classified as a verbal aid, in the sense of additional verbal component.

3. Emphasis on Non-Verbal Messages such as conspicuous facial expressions (Figures 1 and 3), gestures, posture; presence of objects/symbols in close-up. This may be one way, although not the only means to assess the Dominant Level of Communication which constitutes category 9 in the Picture's ID card (Appendix I).

All other categories in the Photo ID card may be used as indicators of connotation, although they are not explored in this paper. For instance, the Location on Page category may be an indicator of importance, along with size. The Origin of the photograph may connote the high status attributed to the news item if it denotes that the newspaper sent a staff photographer to a distant location for special coverage instead of using a picture provided by a news agency.

Perceived Denotation/Connotation

Four judges rated a sub-sample of the 43 photographs (n=14) according to perceived degree of denotation (operationalized as Informative Power) and perceived degree of connotation (operationalized as Affective Power). The five point scale and the definitions of both dimensions are found on Appendix II. The judges (one man and three women) had at least a college degree.

Figure 3

© 1981, The Washington Post Company SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 13, 1981

ı to Trim Defense Increa

The Pentagon Is Jubilant

Most of the $13 billion Reagan wants to cut from the Pentagon spending account can be absorbed, officials said, by slowing the planned increase in Army strength and the stockpiling of ammunition abroad; retiring some Navy ships earlier and postponing construction of about 10 of those planned for the next five years, and reducing the volume of aircraft purchases for the next few years.

"It's a big victory for Weinberger," said an admiring fellow defense executive. He said Stockman pushed hard for cuts totaling about $30 billion for fiscal 1982, 1983 and 1984 and for slashing total obligational authority by $80 billion. The total obligational authority account includes money that is committed to defense contractors for future payment as well as those funds to be spent within a given year.

See PENTAGON, A20, Col. 1

By Martin Schram
Washington Post Staff Writer

President Reagan decided yesterday to trim his planned increases in defense spending outlays for the next three fiscal years by $13 billion, a figure that falls considerably short of what Office of Management and Budget Director David A. Stockman recommended and which means new, larger cuts in domestic programs.

Last month, presidential chief of staff James A. Baker III said that the president was "prepared" to cut defense outlays for 1983 and 1984 by $30 billion to $30 billion, and

AUSTIN WINS

Associated Press Photos

Tracy Austin (left) is all smiles and Martina Navratilova (right) bursts into tears after Austin won the women's title in U.S. Open tennis. John McEnroe and Bjorn Borg gained today's men's final. -- Details on Page D1.

Size: 16.5 column/inches. Verbal Aids: Yes.

Emphasis on non-verbal messages: Yes.

Lines' semantic overtones: Yes.

Affective Power: 4.2 (on 5-point scale).

Findings

The Informative Power/Affective Power mean scores for the 14 photographs are shown on Table I. The Kendall Coefficient of Concordance (W) for the Informative Power Dimension was not significant. Agreement among judges was high on the affective power dimension, as the coefficient of concordance was 42.2, significant at .001. Since the Informative Power dimension could not be validated, the question of whether photographs rating high in denotative value would also have a high score in connotation was not explored.

By comparing the Affective Power mean scores of the 14 pictures in the subsample with four descriptive features considered as indicators of connotation (Table II), one can see that those photos high in affective power (that is, scoring 4.0 or higher) also displayed an emphasis on non-verbal messages such as conspicuous facial expressions, gestures or posture conveying a symbolic meaning. (Figures 1 and 3 fall into this category). On the other hand, the pictures which had the lowest Affective Power scores did not display such emphasis. This observation leads to the conclusion that news photographs which display conspicuous non-verbal cues are perceived to have a higher connotative value than photos without non-verbal emphasis.

TABLE I

RANKING OF NEWS PHOTOS ACCORDING TO PERCEIVED INFORMATIVE/AFFECTIVE POWER.
(Mean Scores. Five-point scale).

Photo Date	Informative Power	Affective Power
Aug.29	3.2	4.7
Sep.05	2.5	4.7
Sep.13	4.5	4.2
Sep.01	3.7	4.2
Oct.01	2.7	4.0
Oct.06	4.5	4.0
Sep.08	2.2	4.0
Aug.27	2.5	3.2
Sep.14	4.5	2.7
Sep.26	4.2	2.7
Sep.28	3.0	2.0
Sep.21	2.2	2.5
Sep.15	2.0	1.7
Sep.29	3.7	1.2

n = 14 # of judges: 4.

- The coefficient of concordance for the Informative Dimension was not significant:(21.4).

- The coefficient of concordance for the Affective Dimension was 42.2, significant at .001.

TABLE II

PERCEIVED AFFECTIVE POWER OF NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS
COMPARED TO FOUR INDICATORS OF CONNOTATION

Photo	(+) Affec. Power	(++) Size	Emphasis nonverbal message	Verbal Aids	Lines Semantic Overtones
Aug.26	4.7	13.5	yes	no	yes
Sep.05	4.7	21	yes	no	no
Sep.13	4.2	16.5	yes	yes	yes
Sep.01	4.2	22	yes	no	no
Oct.01	4.0	13.5	yes	yes	yes
Oct.06	4.0	22	yes	no	no
Sep.08	4.0	21	yes	no	no
Aug.27	3.2	24	yes	no	no
Sep.14	2.7	22.5	yes	yes	no
Sep.26	2.7	16.5	yes	no	no
Sep.28	2.0	22.5	yes	yes	no
Sep.21	1.7	24	no	yes	no
Sep.15	1.7	21	no	no	no
Sep.29	1.2	19.5	no	no	no

(+) Mean score values on a 5-point scale (Minimal to High Affective Power).

(++) Column/inches. Pictures measuring 20 column/inches and more (above the mean size for the whole sample (N = 43) were considered to connote the importance of the news item from the editor's viewpoint.

(Photographs listed on this Table constitute the sub-sample (n=14) rated by four judges on the Affective Power scale. The other indicators of connotation were taken from each photo's ID card.).

As for the five indicators of connotation shown on Table III for the entire sample (n=43), the use of verbal aids such as overlines, cacthlines or justaposed cacthlines appears in conjonction with emphasis on non-verbal cues and/or lines (meaning caption and/or verbal aids) with semantical overtones.

Large size pictures (measuring 20 column/inches and more, according to the adopted definition) were usually dissociated from verbal aids. Of the 26 oversized pictures in the sample, only seven displayed verbal aids. Five of these were oversized pictures of sports events/stars.

The news photo's subject is apparently one criterion for the use of verbal aids. All sports related photographs, regardless of size, carried overlines. For example: "Down out with Redskins" (Sep.7), "Austin Wins" (Sep.13, on women's tennis competition) and "Beginning of the End" (Sep.17, on box championship). Verbal aids in sports photographs may indicate that, unable to compete with the electronic media for visual impact, the newspaper uses its asset "par excellence" - the printed word - in order to enhance its visual message.

TABLE III - ANALYSIS OF 43 NEWS PICTURES ACCORDING TO FIVE INDICATORS OF CONNOTATION

Photo Date	Size	Verbal Aids	News Status	Nonverbal Emphasis	Lines Semantic Overtones
8/26	21	no	b	yes	no
8/27	24	no	c	yes	no
8/28	17	no	b	n/a	no
8/29	13.5	no	b	yes	yes
8/30	11	no	e	yes	yes
8/31	16.5	no	d	n/a	yes
9/01	22	no	b	yes	no
9/02	22.5	yes	c	yes	yes
9/03	12	no	b	no	no
9/04	22.5	no	e	yes	[illegible]
9/05	21	no	b	yes	no
9/06	24	no	b	no	no
9/07	40	yes	a	yes	yes
9/08	21	no	b	yes	no
9/09	17	no	b	no	no
9/10	25.5	no	b	yes	no
9/11	16.5	no	b	yes	no
9/12	16.5	no	b	yes	yes
9/13	16.5	yes	c	yes	yes
9/14	22.5	yes	c	yes	no
9/15	21	no	c	no	no

(over)

- Size: column/inches.
- News Status: (a) Photo-news (self-contained), (b) Photo illustrating news item, (c) Call to inside story, (d) Photo illustrating main headline news, (e) Photo illustrating feature article.

Table III - Analysis of 43 News Photos According to Five Indicators of Connotation. (Continued)

Photo	(+) Size	Verbal Aids	News Status	Emphasis Nonverbal message	Lines Semantic Overtones
9/16	16.5	no	b	no	no
9/17	11	yes	b	yes	no
9/18	22	no	b	no	no
9/19	22.5	no	a	yes	no
9/20	27	no	d	no	yes
9/21	24	yes	e	no	yes
9/22	30	yes	c	no	no
9/23	22	no	c	no	no
9/24	21	yes	b	yes	no
9/25	19.5	no	c	yes	no
9/26	16.5	yes	c	yes	no
9/27	22.5	no	e	yes	no
9/28	22.5	yes	d	yes	no
9/29	19.5	no	c	no	no
9/30	22.5	no	c	no	no
10/1	16.5	no	c	no	no
10/2	22.5	no	b	yes	no
10/3	13.5	no	d	yes	no
10/4	13.5	yes	e	yes	yes
10/5	20	no	b	no	no
10/6	22	no	b	yes	no
10/7	20	no	a	no	no

- Size: in column/inches.
- News Status: (a) Photo-news (self-contained), (b) Photo illustrating news, (c) Call to inside story, (d) Photo illustrating main headline news, (e) Photo illustrating feature article.

Summary and Conclusions

This paper reported an attempt to assess the connotative dimension of new photos by (1) identifying possible indicators of symbolic meaning among the pictures' descriptive features and (2) evaluating the photos' degree of affective power as a perceptual measure of connotation.

A framework for the analysis of news photos emerged from the examination of 43 front page photographs published by The Washington Post between August 26 and October 7, 1981. Such framework comprises: (a) a news photo's ID card with 10 categories provided as keys to analyze connotation (Appendix I), and (b) a five-point scale to measure the perceived degree of affective power (Appendix II, b).

The use of the ID card to describe the 43 photographs revealed a potential for comparison among pictures, themes, and news photos' components. Further elaboration is needed to hopefully transform such categories into rating scales and/or cross tabulations. For instance, the combination of size, location on page, news status and dominant level of communication may yield a typology of front page news photos.

The Affective Power/Informative Power scales used to rate a subsample of 14 photographs, need refinement and validation. If, on one hand, agreement was high on the affective power dimension ratings (W = 42.2, significant at .001), the informative power dimension failed to reach an acceptable level of agreement.

Although both dimensions need further testing and the ID card categories were only partially explored, it is expected that the framework presented here provide a new way of thinking about newspaper photographs. A new way of thinking about connotation in photojournalism will hopefully lead to a reassessment of the criteria for evaluating photojournalistic messages. Their connotative dimension should be regarded as enhancing rather than disminishing their informational content.

APPENDIX I - A NEWS PHOTOGRAPH'S ID CARD

1. LOCATION ON PAGE
a) Top (left, middle, right).
b) Center of Page.
c) Bottom (left, middle, right).

2. SIZE (includes caption).

3. ORIGIN (content of credit line; usually cites newspaper's staff photographer or news agency).

4. DESIGN EMPHASIS
a) Framed
b) Unframed
c) Only photo on page.

5. EMPHASIS ON NON-VERBAL MESSAGE (cues to symbolic meaning such as found in peculiar facial expressions, gestures, posture, or in a close-up of a particular object or symbol).

6. NEWS STATUS
a) Photo-news (self-contained).
b) Photo illustrating news item.
c) Call to inside story.
d) Photo illustrating main headline news.
e) Photo illustrating feature story.

7. NEWS SUBJECT (national politics, international relations, sports, arts, scientific achievement, crime, etc.).

8. VERBAL AIDS
a) Presence of overlines, catchlines, sidelines. (The presence of captions is taken for granted as an integral part of the news photograph. Therefore it is not counted as part of this category).
b) Presence of semantic overtones in any of the verbal aids as well as in the caption. Examples include semantically loaded words, metaphors and puns.

9. DOMINANT LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION
a) Informational, or representational.
b) Symbolic (obvious and obtuse meaning).

10. DEGREE OF DENOTATION/ CONNOTATION
a) Informative Power
b) Affective Power.

APPENDIX II - SCALES FOR ASSESSING TWO DIMENSIONS OF A NEWS PHOTOGRAPH.

a) DENOTATIVE DIMENSION.

Rate each photograph according to how much Informative Power you consider it to have. Informative Power refers to the photograph's documentary quality, how well it reports on the subject/event, how much descriptive value it has.

Photo	Minimal Informative Power				High Informative Power
01	1	2	3	4	5

b) CONNOTATIVE DIMENSION.

Rate each photograph according to how much Affective Power you consider it to have. Affective Power refers to the photograph's impressionistic quality, how much implicit meaning it contains, how much it is bound to an additional interpretation beyond its explicit descriptive nature.

Photo	Minimal Affective Power				High Affective Power
01	1	2	3	4	5

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